

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-9

THE BALTIMORE SUN
1 February 1983

Opinion • Commentary

Reagan and Russia—I

The Beginning of the End

THE lack of a clear and steady view has bedeviled American policy toward Soviet Russia from the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

For the past 65 years, the way American policymakers, academics and journalists regard the Soviet Union has undergone wild periodic swings: At one moment the Communist regime is on its last legs, at the next it is a worldwide menace. Sometimes both estimates prevail at once.

Because policy is the offspring of perception, it is no small matter to know how the president and his advisers perceive the Soviet Union, especially since foreign policy is a public enterprise in which the national liability may be unlimited.

President Reagan has made his views perfectly plain, to the delight of the Republican

By Stephens Broening

Party's right wing and to the astonishment of many academics whose life's work is the study of the immensely complicated Soviet system.

With Mr. Reagan the complexities tend to disappear; nuance is an alien presence. As his former campaign manager Stuart Spencer said of him on public television the other night, "With Ronald Reagan, what you see is what you get."

The president set the tone in his first press conference. On the threshold of a term of office that was bound to involve some kind of dealings, if not negotiations, with the only power that can destroy us, he had this to say about Soviet leaders, past and present: "... they reserve unto themselves the right to commit any crime, to lie, to cheat" in order to attain their ends.

This was more than just an indication that Mr. Reagan intended to be rashly skeptical in any transactions with Soviet leaders. It was evidence of a deeply held animus. Just as deep, as Mr. Reagan's subsequent public pronouncements have shown, is his conviction that the Soviet regime is on the verge of collapse.

"The West won't contain communism, it will transcend communism," he told the graduating class at Notre Dame in May, 1981. "It won't bother to denounce it, it will

dismiss it as some bizarre chapter in human history whose last pages are even now being written."

A month later, he said at a press conference, that "... the things we're seeing, not only in Poland but the reports that are beginning to come out of Russia itself about the younger generation and its resistance to long-time government controls, [are] an indication that communism is an aberration. It's not a normal way of living for human beings, and I think we are seeing the first, beginning cracks, the beginning of the end."

At a meeting with newspaper editors in October, 1981, the president made a connection between the U.S. rearmament program and the Soviet economic weakness he saw, suggesting that if the Soviets were faced with an uncontrolled arms race they would have to accept mutual arms reductions.

"There's one thing sure," he said. "They cannot vastly increase their military productivity because they've already got their people on a starvation diet as far as consumer products are concerned. But they know our potential capacity industrially and they can't match it. So we've got the chip this time, that if we show them the will and determination to go forward with a military buildup in our own defense and the defense of our allies, they then have to weigh: do they want to meet us realistically on a program of disarmament or do they want to face a legitimate arms race in which we're racing? ... we could go forward with an arms race and they can't keep up."

Last May, in a commencement address at Eureka College, the president said "the Soviet empire is faltering." The Soviet "dictatorship," he said, "has forged the largest armed force in the world. It has done so by preempting the human needs of its people and, in the end, this course will undermine the foundations of the Soviet system."

Perhaps the most sophisticated presentation of the White House position on the Sovi-

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